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ANDREWS UNIVERSITY

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

SABBATH CONFERENCES OF 1848

A Report

Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

CH 570-2, History of The Seventh-day Adventist Church

by

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PREFACE

After an earnest study of all the available information on the Sabbath Conferences of 1848, I have attempted to bring a clearer understanding as to the nature and purpose of these conferences with a special emphasis on the doctrines discussed and the use of the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy in the formation of these doctrines. It has been rather difficult to evaluate the truths discussed. All to often, there is found no information as to what took place; instead, it is left up to the individual student to refer to previous and later developments to determine the actual emphasis of each conference. My evaluation of the use of the Spirit of Prophecy may be in disagreement with some who feel that it has been the sole means of developing some basic doctrines of the church. This is left up to the individual reader to decide as he examines the evidence.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sabbath Conferences, which were very significant in uniting the truths of the Sabbath keeping people, were begun in 1848 and lasted through 1850. Partially because this was the year they began and also the year that the most information on them has been perserved, the conferences have been noted as the "1848 Conferences." There have been few primary sources perserved on these conferences to know a great deal about the doctrinal studies at the conferences themselves. But what is known is this:

> These conferences were vital, and proved to be a unifying, clarifying, and fortifying force, consolidating the positions of the growing Sabbatarian group, as well as molding and shaping the future course of an emerging movement, so destined to be heard from.[1]

Froom goes on to explain this statement in the following footnote:

> The records are meager, but are sufficient to give the essential outline. The sanctuary position, developed by Edson, Crosier, and Hahn, was set forth in the Day Dawn and the Day-Star of 1845 and 1846. And the literature that developed immediately after, and as a result of the conferences, reveals much more of the scope -- the Present Truth (1849), the Advent Review (1850), the early volumes of the Review and Herald, and the Youth's Instructor. Add to these a dozen pamphlets, broadsides, and books of the time -- by Bates, White, and others, the biographies of Bates and J. N. Loughborough -- and the remarkable range and content of positions taken are disclosed.
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> These all required time for the fuller development, but were all there in embryo in 1848. We do not know the precise order of all the discussions or in just which conference

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[1]Froom, LeRoy E., The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers, Volume IV, Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954, p. 1021.

> certain of the items were presented, but we know the conclusions reached, and can reconstruct with fair accuracy a composite picture of their total discussion.[2]

It is essential to note that such leading men as James White, Joseph Bates, Stephen Pierce, and Hiram Edson, did not get together to simply discuss theology "for the sake of discussion." They studied the Bible on various points of doctrine for very practical reasons. "Again and again these brethern came together to study the Bible, in order that they might know its meaning, and be prepared to teach it with power." (emphasis supplied)[3]

The times of the conferences -- sometimes Friday and Sabbath, often Sabbath and Sunday, and sometimes Thursday to Monday -- were first arranged by letter and later (from 1849 on) by periodicals.[4] Even though the times and places (mostly homes) were arranged for the convience of those planning to attend, the travel to them was very difficult. However, because God had a special purpose for them, He provided for their attendance very miracously.[5] As James White described his desire to attend them, the reader is moved with compassion:

> On the summer of 1848, we received an invitation to hold a conference with the few friends in western New York [Volney]. I was destitute of means, and with feeble health entered the

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[2]Ibid., footnote number 1.

[3]White, Ellen, Special Testimonies, Series B, Number 2, Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, p. 57.

[4]Neufeld, Don F., "Sabbath Conferences," Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, Volume X, Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966, p. 1121.

[5]White, Ellen, Testimonies for the Church, Volume I, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948, pp. 84,85.

> hay-field to earn the sum necessary to bear our expenses to that meeting. I took a large job of mowing, and when fainting beneath the noonday sun, I would bow before God in my swath, call upon him for strength, rise refreshed, and mow on again. In five weeks I earned enough to bear our expenses to the conference.[6]

According to the record, there were twenty-two conferences in all: six in 1848, six in 1849 (three of which the Whites attended in Paris, Maine and Oswego and Centerport, New York), and ten in 1850. The conferences in 1848, being the best known, will be discussed in the next few pages of this paper. In the following order, they took place at: Rocky Hill, Connecticut; Volney and Port Gibson, New York; Rocky Hill, Connecticut; Topsham, Maine; and Dorchester, Massachusetts.

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[6]White, James, Life Incidents in Connection with the Great Advent Movement as Illustrated by the Three Angels, Battle Creek, Michigan: Steam Press of Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868, p. 274.

CONFERENCES

Rocky Hill

The first conference was held at Albert Belden's home on April 20-24. From a small group of fifteen, the group grew to fifty the next day. The important leaders at this first conference were Bates, Gurney, Chamberlain, and James and Ellen White. Ellen White speaks of it as follows:

> The conference at Rocky Hill was held in the large unfinished chamber of Brother Albert Belden's house. In a letter to Brother Stockbridge Howland, my husband wrote of the meeting as follows:
>
> '. . .Brother Bates presented the commandments in a clear light, and their importance was urged home by powerful testimonies. The word had effect to establish those already in the truth, and to awaken those who were not fully decided.'[7]

James White elaborates on this description in a letter to Brother and Sister Hastings on April 27:

> Our conference which closed Monday morning was deeply interesting. I never attended a better meeting. God gave His servants the truth in a clear light, and they spoke it with solemn power. Brother Bates' principle subject was the commandments. He was able to make the case plain that the only entrance to 'life' was by keeping the commandments, and to break them was sure 'death' (eternal)! B. Matthias was with us on the Sabbath. He labored to show that the Sabbath was abolished, -- that we were under the bondage of Moses' Law -- had fallen from grace etc. etc. All his arguments were fully met but still he would not bow to truth to show that we did not keep the Sabbath, for we were not as strick as God required

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[7]White, Ellen, Life Sketches of Ellen White, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1943, p. 108.

> the Jews to be. All this turned to God's glory, for some who were undecided took a stand on the Sabbath.[8]

According to James White, this conference marked a new era in the cause. Even though, it was not large in number or influence, it nevertheless encouraged the brethern.[9]

Several points of interest brought out in this conference were 1. the emphasis on the law and the function it played in eternal life (judging from later developments, this concept may not have been completely clear at this time.), 2. James White's message on the Third Angel,[10] and 3. the way God gave Ellen White clear light and power to speak in convincing the brethern. This third point has become the most talked about in denominational ranks because it deals with the Spirit of Prophecy. James White felt that it was of much value in 1848; Thus he gives three reasons why it should be defended:

> 1. Because her experience and labors have been closely connected with its rise and progress.
> 2. Because of the spirit of prejudice and enmity existing against her calling and labors. This is manifest by those who are ignorant of the facts in the case, or if not wholly ignorant, are led by a spirit of frenzied persecution. The bearing which this has upon the cause is sufficient reason for laying the facts as they are before the public.
> 3. Because of the importance of her work, in connection with the cause. . . .[11]

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[8]James White Letter, April 27, 1848, Document File Number 1, Ellen G. White Vault, Andrews University Branch, p. 17.

[9]White, James, Life Incidents, p. 271.

[10]Spalding, Arthur, Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists, Volume I, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pubishing Association, 1966, p. 191.

[11]White, James, Life Incidents, p. 271.

Volney

August 18, at Volney, New York, was the time and place of the second conference. Among the thirty-five that were present, the leaders were Bates, Chamberlain, Gurney, Edson, and James and Ellen White. Hiram Edson, being the foremost exponent of the faith in New York, gave James and Ellen White an invitation to the meeting.

Ellen White writes that the condition that took place at this conference was not the most advantageous for Bible study:

> There were about thirty-five present, all that could be collected in that part of the state. There hardly two agreed. Each was strenuous for his views, declaring that they were according to the Bible. All were anxious for an opportunity to advance their sentiments, or to preach to us. They were told that we had not come so great a distance to hear them, but had come to teach them the truth.[12]

An interesting point to note is that there were some thirty-five in that part of the state of New York that had some interest in the Sabbath movement.

In another place, it was said that there were thirty-five present' and thirty-five different creeds. One of these heretical creeds was held by David Arnold who followed the views of George Storrs' party which put the millennium in the past and objected to the celebration of the Lord's Supper except at Passover times.[13]

James White continues the description of this conference by saying what happened next.

> . . .and the good brethern would have seperated in confusion and trial, had not the Lord worked in a special manner. His Spirit rested upon Mrs. W., and she was taken off into

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[12]White, Ellen, Spiritual Gifts, Volume II, Battle Creek, Michigan: James White, 1858, p. 98.

[13]Spalding, p. 193.

> vision. The entire congregation believed that it was the work of God, and were deeply affected.[14]

What had happened was that the presentation of these errors and the confusion that took place caused Mrs. White to faint. After Bates, Chamberlain, Gurney, Edson, and her husband prayed for her, she was taken off into vision. In this vision, she was shown the errors in contrast to the truth. Lifting a heavy Bible, she turned the pages to text after text in favor of truth. She urged the people to unite upon the truth of the third angel's message. Finally, when the meeting was closed, they were in harmony including David Arnold who became one of the most prominant leaders in New York.

As already seen in an above quotation, some of the discussions that took place centered around the millennium and the Lord's Supper. But as James White shows in a letter to Brother and Sister Hastings, the discussions also centered around other related topics.

> My principle message was on Matt. 25:1-11. The brethern are strong on the Sabbath and Shut Door. Most all confessed that they gained much strength from the meeting. . . .
>
> My Brother and Sister, here is the standard to rally around. Jesus has left his mediatorial throne. He is now claiming His new Kingdom. Do you believe it, I hope you do. Well this is the present 'faith of Jesus.' So the shut door and Sabbath is the present truth. These truths will form and keep up the same mark of distinction between us and believers as God made in 1844.[16]

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[14]White, James, Life Incidents, p. 274.

[15]Spalding, p. 194. (See also White, Ellen, Spiritual Gifts, Volume II, pp. 98,99.)

[16]James White Letter, August 26, 1848, Document File Number 1. Ellen G. White Vault, Andrews University Branch, pp. 27-29.

He goes on to describe the points of belief of Revelation fourteen as related to the three angels' messages. The first message is of the Advent Angel which took place between 1840-1843. The second angel tells of Babylon falling in 1844 when the Advent people rushed out of Babylon. The third angel gives a warning message for them not to receive the marks they have gotten rid of in 1844.[17]

Elder White then gives his confidence in the truth by saying, "Oh! how glad I am that I know my whereabouts. Yes, never was there a people whose position was so plainly marked out in the Word as ours. We know where we stand."[18]

Port Gibson

The third conference took place on August 27-28, in Hiram Edson's barn, at Port Gibson, New York. It is interesting to note that this was the same barn in which Edson prayed the night before October 23, 1844. Not much is known about this conference that is distinctive from the others. However, it is known that Ellen White had a vision on the importance for the brethern in western New York to lay aside their differences and to unite upon the Bible truth.[19] Apparently, what actually took place in discussion was similiar to that of the conference held in Volney.

Rocky Hill

On September 8-9, the fourth conference was again held at Rocky Hill. Most likely, the discussions were similiar to the previous conferences.

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] White, Ellen, Spiritual Gifts, Volume II, p. 98.

Topsham

This conference, at Topsham, Main, was held in Brother Howland's house on October 20-22. The leading men (and woman) that were expected to be at the conference were Bates, Gurney, Nicholas, and James and Ellen White.

Apparently there are no sources of what actually took place or who actually was there. But what is known about the conference is found in a letter written by James White a few weeks before. He projects into what is to take place.

> My chief object in writing to you now is to notify you that the 'outcasts' in Main are to have a general meeting at the house of Brother S. Howland in Topsham, Main.
>
> The principle points on which we dwell as present truth are the 7th day Sabbath and Shut Door. In this we wish to honor God's most holy institution and also acknowledge the work of God in our Second Advent experiences.
>
> We do not wish to shut out any new truth, or countenance any of the errors of the dark age. Our object is to do good. We wish to hold up truth and expose error. We would be happy to see any who are seeking for truth in sincerity and humility.[20]

At this conference, the idea was "tossed about" as to the possibility of a publishing work, but because they were penniless, the idea seemed futile.

Dorchester

This sixth conference is the "black sheep" of all the conferences, for many times it is not even considered one of the Sabbath conferences. Nevertheless, it took place on November 18, at the home of Otis Nichols.

At this conference, before the actual meeting began, Ellen White was given a vision in which she was shown the sealing message and the

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[20]James White Letter, October 2, 1848, Document File Number 1, Ellen G. White Vault, Andrews University Branch, p. 31.

instructions to publish the message. Joseph Bates recorded what Ellen White said in the following paragraphs:

> The time of trouble has commenced, it is begun. The reason why the four winds have not let go is because the saints are not all sealed. It's on the increase, and will increase more and more; the trouble will never end until the earth is rid of the wicked.
>
> At that time neighbor will be against neighbor. That time has not yet come, when brother against brother and sister against sister; but will come when Michael stands up.
>
> When Michael stands up this trouble will be all over the earth.
>
> Why they are just ready to blow. There's a check put on because the saints are not sealed.
>
> Yea, publish the things thou hast seen and heard, and the blessing of God will attend. Look ye! that the rising is in strength, and grows brighter and brighter.[21]

Loughborough describes what took place next:

> After coming out of this vision Mrs. White said to her husband, 'I have a message for you. You must begin to print a little paper and send it out to the people. Let it be small at first; but as the people read they will send you means with which to print, and it will be a success from the first. From this small beginning it was shown me to be like streams of light that went clear around the world.'[22]

With this vision began the publication of the Present Truth in July of 1849, which later developed into the Seventh-day Adventists Publishing work around the world.

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[21]Bates, Joseph, Seal of the Living God. New Bedford: Benjamin Lindsay, 1849, Document File Number 323, Ellen G. White Vault, Andrews University Branch, pp. 26,27.

[22]Loughborough, J.N., The Great Second Advent Movement, Nashville, Tennessee: Southern Publishing Association, 1905, pp. 274,275.

EVALUATION

Truths Discussed

In essence, the conferences partially featured a review of the past -- both the distant and near past. They were a review of the parallels between the disappointments of the apostolic band and the 1844 movement. They were a study of the disappointment in light of history, type, and prophecy. They were also a review of the study made by Hiram Edson.[23] However, after the conferences had ended in 1848, the great prophetic outlines and the premillennial second advent position were taken for granted. With the beginning of the publication of the Present Truth, there was no need to go further into a discussion of these matters. Instead, the editorial policy laid particular emphasis on the Sabbath, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the sanctuary, as the truths for the present time.[24] The truths that were discussed can be summarized because of previous and later developments in the following manner: 1. the imminent, personal, premillennial second advent, 2. major prophetic outlines and time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, 3. the conditional immortality of man, 4. the seventh-day Sabbath, 5. the heavenly sanctuary and two-fold ministry of Christ, 6. the spirit of prophecy, and 7. the third angel's message. Froom explains the development of these seven points in the following footnote:

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[23]Froom, Op.Cit., p. 1027.

[24]Ibid., p. 1925.

> The first three points, brought over almost intact from the seventh-month phase of Millerism, were here restudied and reaffirmed. The next three, considered 'new truth,' had been developed independently, in widely separated sections. Now they were studied through together and adopted. The last point was gradualy developed.[25]

Development of Truths

There has been great discussion as to if the truths mentioned above have been developed by Bible study or by the use of the Spirit of Prophecy. In evaluating the conferences in light of statements from Ellen White, I would have to say that both methods were used to develop these truths. In support of the use of earnest Bible study, there is the following quotation:

> We had to search and wait the opening of truth receiving a ray of light here and a ray there, laboring and pleading for God to reveal truth to us. But now the truth is plain. . . .[26]

The power of the Spirit of God upon each Bible student played a significant role as they developed new truths.

> At times the power of God came upon us in a marked manner, and when clear light revealed the points of truth, we would weep and rejoice together. We loved Jesus; we loved one another.[27]

There are also quotations that definitely support the use of the Spirit of Prophecy in developing these truths.

> When they came to the point in their study where they said, 'We can do nothing more,' the Spirit of the Lord would come

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[25] Ibid., Footnote Number 19, p. 1031.

[26] Ellen G. White, Manuscript 3, 1854, (White, Arthur, Ellen G. White, Messenger to the Remnant, Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1965, p. 39.

[27] White, Ellen, Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1962, pp. 25,26.

> upon me, I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passages we had been studying would be given me, with instruction as to how we were to labor and teach effectively. Thus light was given that helped us to understand the scriptures in regard to Christ, His mission, and His priesthood. A line of truth extending from that time to the time when we shall enter the city of God was made plain to me, and I gave to others the instruction that the Lord had given me.[28]

One must be careful not to think that these views were Mrs. White's; They were God's. The following affirms this:

> During this whole time I could not understand the reasoning of the brethern. My mind was locked, as it were, and I could not comprehend the meaning of the scriptures we were studying. This was one of the greatest sorrows of my life. I was in this condition of mind until all principle points of our faith were made clear to our minds, in harmony with the word of God. The brethern knew that when not in vision, I could not understand these matters, and they accepted as light direct from heaven the revelations given.[29]

In evaluating the use of the Spirit of Prophecy, it must be kept in mind that the Bible was the basis of the development of all doctrinal truths. The roll of the Spirit of Prophecy was to MAKE THE BIBLE CLEAR, and not to be the basic foundation of the truth. Remember also that Ellen White did not give her personal opinions; the messages came from God.

In all fairness, it must be stated that the Sabbath Conferences played one of the most important rolls in developing the truths of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The truths were developed in harmony with the Bible and thus they have remained basic to the church today--one hundred and twenty-four years later. The conferences began in disharmony and ended in the united fellowship of those who carried the truth of God to the world.

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[28]White, Ellen. Special Testimonies Series B, p. 57.

[29]Ibid.

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